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ABSTRACT

Data obtained from a national, cross-sectional survey of the American work force were used to examine the relationship between age and an interview measure of psychological involvement with work (i.e., paid employment). For men, this relationship was curvilinear. Commitment began at a low level among the 16-20 year old men, rose to its highest point among those 30-44 years old, and then declined back to its initially low level among those 55-65 years old. Age was not significantly related to the work commitment of women. Changes in quality of employment through the life cycle were, for men, found to be one determinant of correspondence changes in work commitment. No matter how good or bad men's jobs were in the early part of their working lives, most men ended up with a fairly low degree of committent just prior to retirement age. The concept of anticipatory desocialization from the work role was used to explain the latter finding. (Author)

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WORK COMMITMENT THROUGH THE LIFE CYCLE

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Although all of us devote time and energy, and some of us devote much of ourselves to our work*, surprisingly little is known about how such involvement varies as a function of any number of factors, such as age, sex, and job characteristics. The absence of a sophisticated understanding of work commitment may have to do in part with the lack of conceptual frameworks for its exploration and in part with the lack of accepted sources of data adequate to tease apart relevant, but complex, relationships.

Ways of thinking about the meaning of work or involvement with work have customarily been so abstract that they have defied operationalization. But recently a number of psychologists and psychiatrists--Roger Gould at UCLA, Robert Kahn at Michigan, Bernice Neugarten at the University of Chicago, David Levinson at Yale, and George Valliant at Harvard--among others, have converged in their studies of human development from a life cycle perspective, identifying fairly regular stages or similarities that characterize adults as they grow older. Their findings will doubtless have increasing utility to a number of researchers, including those interested in work commitment, because viewing that commitment in life cycle terms may well be one way to bring some conceptual order to the phenomenon.

Today our intention is to use cross-sectional data to explore the ways that work commitment differs throughout the lives of working men and women. We would like, moreover, to suggest one initial explanation

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*The term "work" is used in this paper as a short-hand for "paid employment," ignoring those forms of routinized, unpaid labor that are not directly remunerated--e.g. volunteer "work", "working" on household tasks, etc.

for such differences--namely, that work commitment may depend upon the rewards one receives for one's work in whatever coinage that a person values. Observed age differences may be less a function of cohort or social change differences than they are of the increased occupational rewards associated with the mobility and seniority that come with longevity in the labor force. In short, caring about one's work may in part be contingent upon being rewarded for that work.

The data used to test this proposition were collected by The University of Michigan's Survey Research Center as part of the 1972-73 Quality of Employment Survey (Quinn & Shepard, 1974). The sample was a national probability one, composed of people 16 years old or older who lived in households and who worked for pay for at least 20 hours a week. Personal interviews were conducted in each respondent's home. The sample used in the present analysis excluded workers who were over 65 years old, were self-employed, or who worked less than 35 hours a week. The resulting analysis sample consisted of 785 men and 362 women.

The principal measure used in the analysis was that of work commitment, based on thirteen questions or combinations of questions covering such matters as working hard, investing interest and energy in work, perceiving one's work as instrumental to one's future happiness, and feeling that one is both valued because of and evaluated according to one's work. (Staines, Quinn and Shepard, in progress) The internal consistency reliability of this measure was .77.

The relationship between age and work commitment is shown in Figure 1 for men and women. For men the relationship was statistically

significant and quite distinctly curvilinear. Commitment began at a low level among the 16-20 year old men, rose to its highest point among those 30-44 years old and then declined back to its initially low levels among those 55-65 years old.

Women's work commitment was slightly less than that of men up through the age of 54. Among women, however, age was not significantly associated with work commitment. Even the pattern of the age-commitment relationship among women did not resemble the curvilinear one observed among men.

If work commitment is not a function of chronological age but is instead a function of time in role, it might be argued that the use of chronological age for women was inappropriate. For most men chronological age and length of time in the work role are closely related, since most men work throughout their adult lives, although the ages at which they enter the labor force may vary. Many women, on the other hand, move in and out of the labor force at different stages of their lives. Two women in their forties might therefore have been in the labor force for considerably different numbers of years. For this reason, the relationship between work commitment and cumulative number of years in the labor force was investigated among the female subsample. But, like chronological age, years in the labor force was not related to work commitment among women. Nor was the relationship between commitment and time clarified for women when additional controls were applied that involved the presence or absence of children in the woman's household. In the latter instance, however, cell sizes became at times precariously small.

We suggested earlier that commitment to the work role might depend upon how well-rewarded a worker had been in that role. One indicator of such rewards was quality of employment. The quality of employment measure used in the analysis was based upon 33 questions or sets of questions that were intended to assess through self-reports characteristics of one's job that could be regarded as reflecting how good or bad that job was. The 33 components of the quality of employment measure fell into four general categories, reflecting how comfortable or trouble-free the job was, how challenging and self-developing it was, how financially rewarding it was, and how adequately it provided a worker with the resources necessary for doing his or her job. (Barnowe, Mangione and Quinn, 1973). In an earlier study this quality of employment measure based on self-reports had been found to correlate .47 with quality of employment as measured by the presumably more "objective" methods of on-the-job observation and employers' records (Cammann, Quinn, Beehr, Gupta, 1975).

According to Figure 2, the quality of men's jobs was poorest in the earliest years of their careers. As was the case with work commitment, quality of employment rose to its highest point among those in the 30-44 age range. But where work commitment began to decline after the age of 44, quality of employment held steady until men had past the age of 54; then it declined somewhat.

Figure 2 suggests that, at least for men, changes in quality of employment throughout the life cycle may be one determinant of the changes in work commitment already observed in Figure 1. Figure 3

approaches the matter more directly. It shows the relationship between age and work commitment for three different levels of quality of employment. Were differences in quality of employment the sole source of the initial relationship between age and commitment, when quality was controlled statistically, the latter relationship would presumably disappear. According to Figure 3, this was not the case. That quality of employment had some direct association with work commitment can be seen by comparing the elevations of the three lines in the figure. At each age level, workers with better jobs were also those who were most committed to their jobs. More importantly, there remained a curvilinear association between age and work commitment even with secondary controls on quality of employment. This relationship was statistically significant, however, only for those men who experienced medium or good quality of employment.

The most unusual aspect of Figure 3 is the convergence of all three lines among the 55-65 year old age group. They converge, moreover, at a fairly low degree of work commitment. In other words, no matter how good or bad men's jobs are in the earlier part of their lives, those men all have about the same level of work commitment just prior to the customary age of retirement--and not a very high level to boot.

What this convergence may reflect, we feel, is anticipatory desocialization from the work role--a surrendering of one's psychological involvement with a role not at the time of leaving it but in anticipation of the time of leaving it.

Additional evidence supporting this progressive psychological disengagement from work as one approaches retirement is found in Figure 4. One possible way of inferring the importance of a particular life role in one's life space is by the extent to which satisfaction with that role is related to satisfaction with one's life in general. Thus, individuals among whom there is a high correlation between life satisfaction and satisfaction with a role are more likely to be highly invested in that role than are others.

Figure 4 shows the correlation between job satisfaction and life satisfaction at each of five age levels. At each the correlation for women was a little less than that for men. More strikingly, the correlations decreased sharply for both sexes through the years, reaching their lowest levels during the pre-retirement years. Difficult to explain are the high correlations for young workers. To be consistent with Figure 1, these correlations should have been quite low.

The data suggest, therefore, that there are at least two forces at work shaping people's commitment to work roles through their life cycles: changes in quality of employment throughout life, as well as anticipatory desocialization as one approaches retirement. We say "at least" two because of the irregularities in the data that these concepts do not help to explain. The first is the inconsistent picture of young workers, highly committed according to one indicator, but quite less so according to another. The second is the difficulty in using either quality of employment or anticipatory desocialization to clarify the work commitments of women.

We hope to examine some of these irregularities in more detail in the future. But what of the futures of those who are leaving the labor force--men and women alike? Does their observed anticipatory desocialization from the work role provide sufficient ground to be optimistic about their subsequent adjustments to retirement? While the desocialization process may be functional for leaving a role, it tells only half the story, because it says nothing about where one goes next or how one is socialized into new roles. Lacking are the formal organizations, role models, explicit expectations and obligations, and informal relationships through which former labor force participants can be resocialized into roles appropriate to the post-retirement years. While all these socialization forces at one time had helped him or her anticipate and learn the new role of worker, both the anticipatory desocialization from that work role and the necessary socialization into ambiguous new roles largely leave the retiring individual to cope alone--without familiar and needed social supports.

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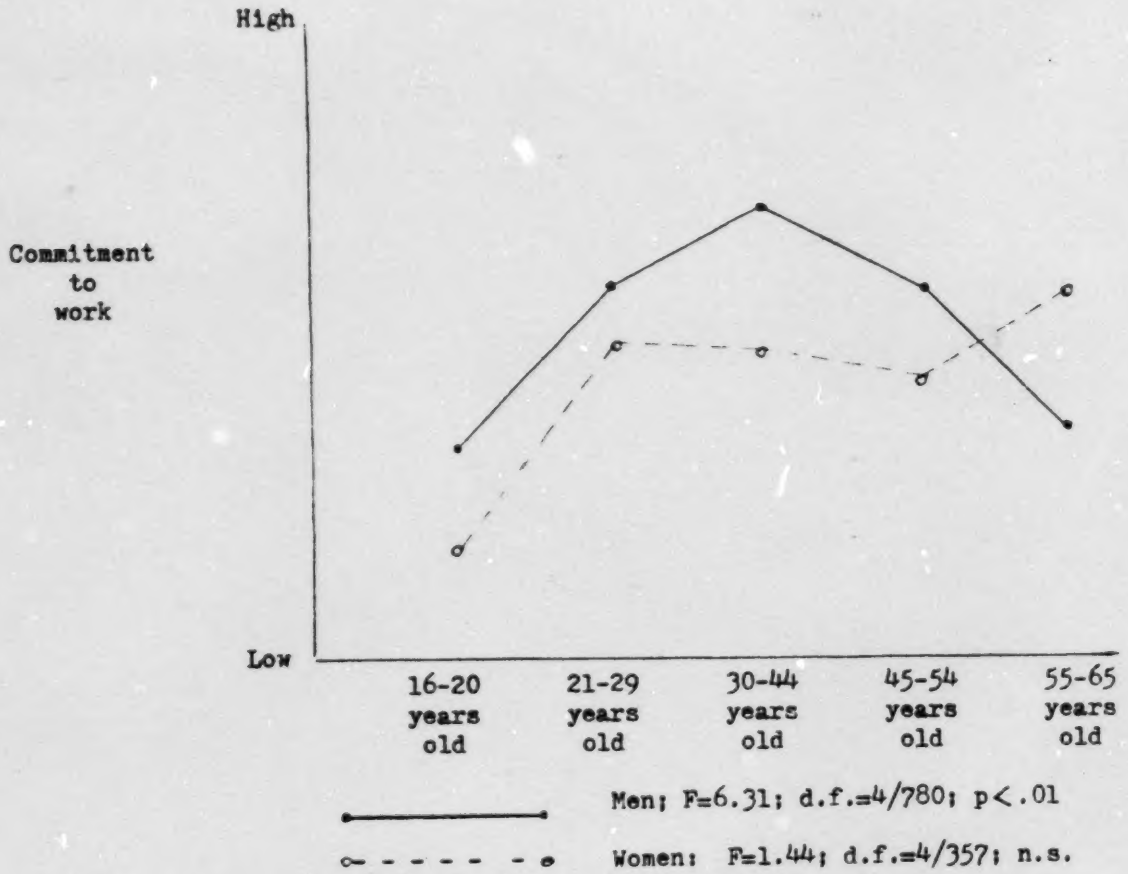

Figure 1. Commitment to work, by age

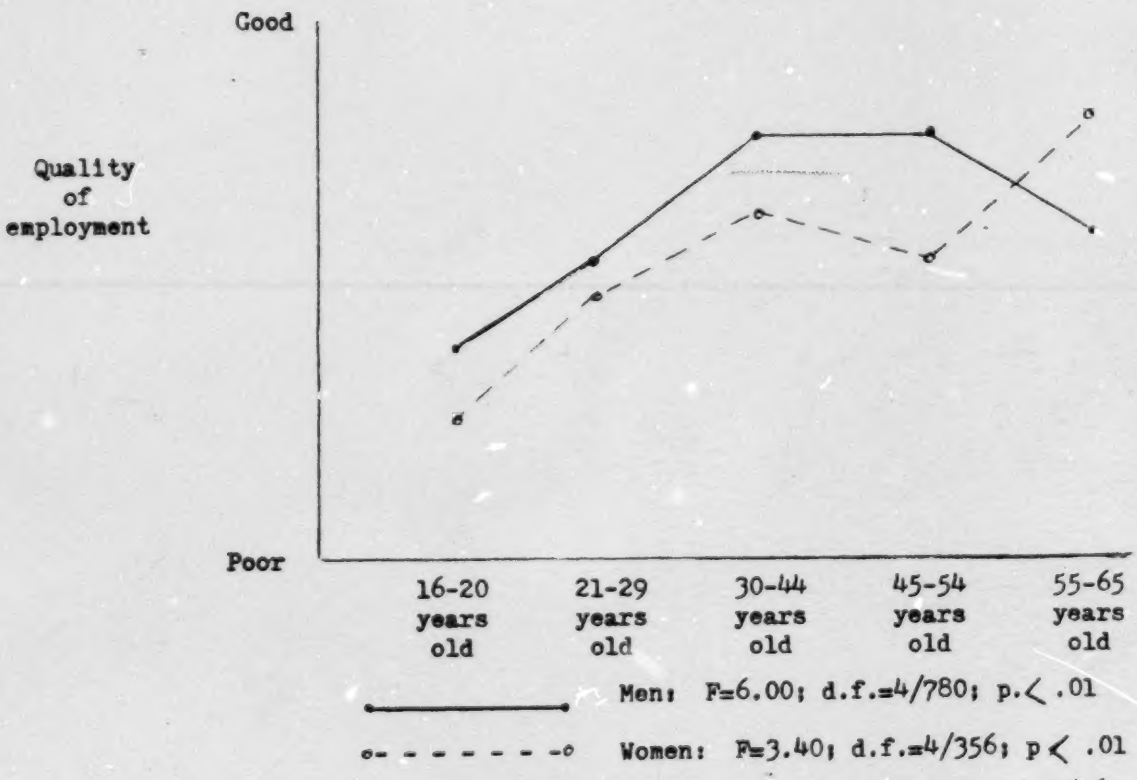

Figure 2. Quality of employment, by age

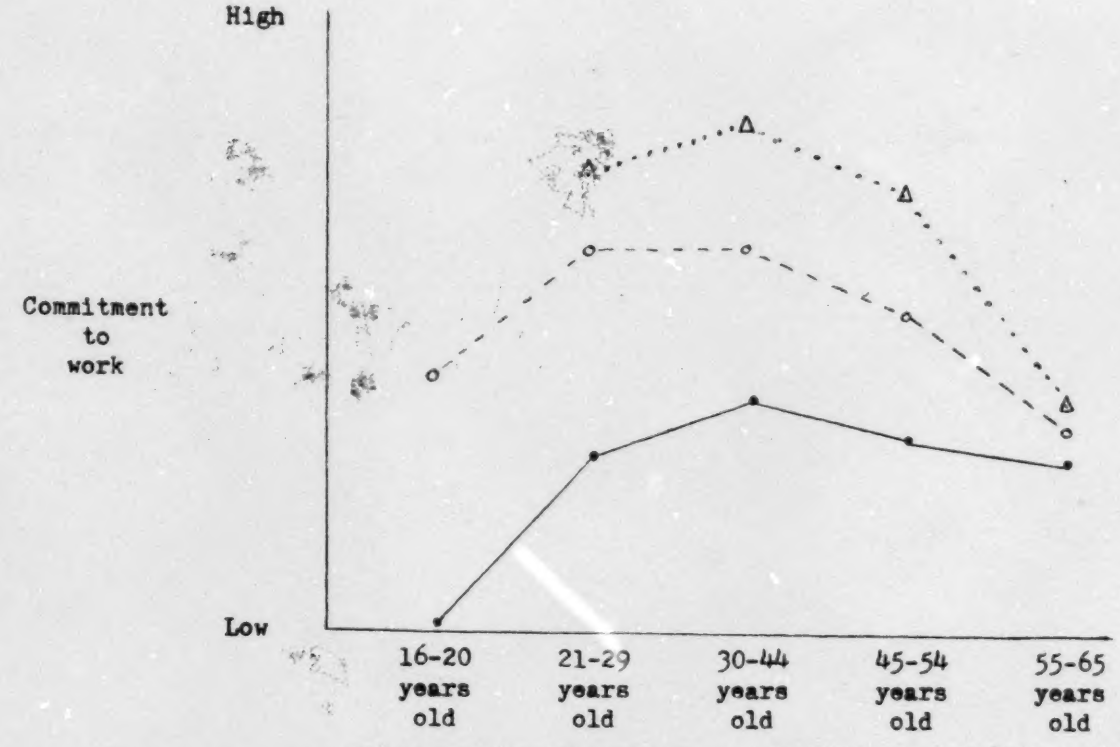
High
Commitment to work
Low
16-20 years old
21-29 years old
30-44 years old
45-54 years old
55-65 years old
Good quality of employment: F=4.32; d.f.=3/233; p < .01
Medium quality of employment: F=2.71; d.f.=4/283; p < .05
Poor quality of employment: F=1.14; d.f.=4/269; n.s.

Figure 3. Commitment to work, by age, for three levels of quality of employment (men only)

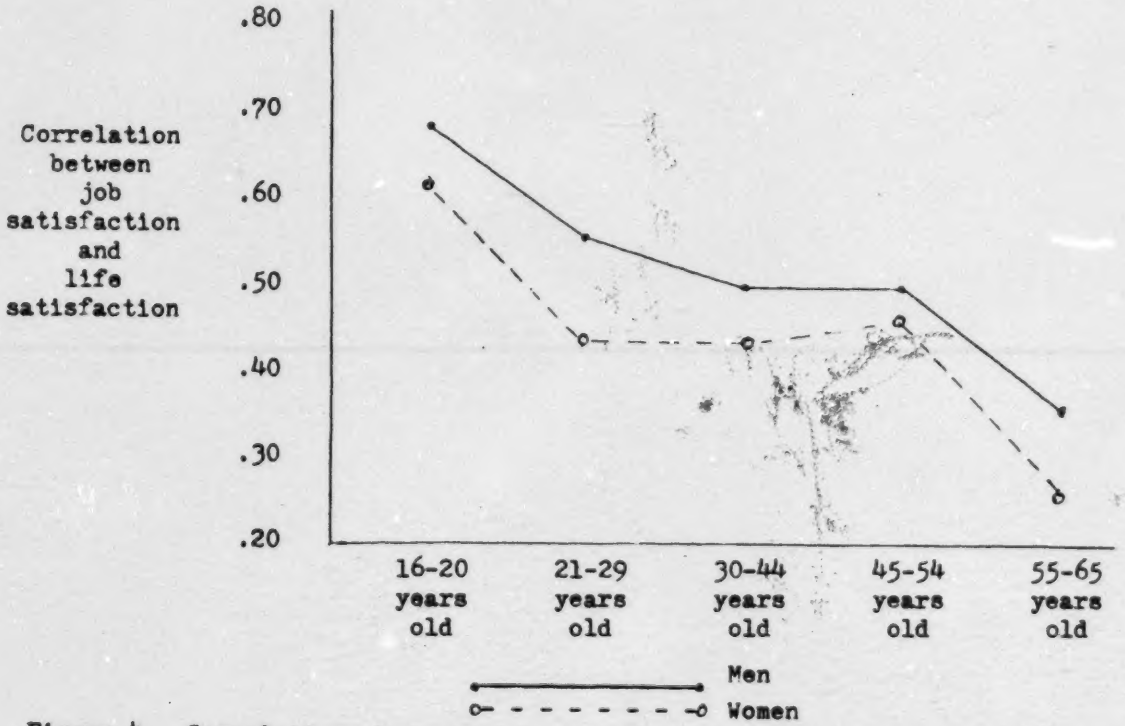

Figure 4. Correlations between job satisfaction and life satisfaction, by age